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## White House Raises Stakes as Contra Vote Looms

### Strategy Is to Place Onus on Democrats

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The Reagan administration's confrontational efforts to draw partisan and patriotic battle lines over aid to the Nicaraguan rebels is the first phase of an election-year strategy designed to convince Democrats that it will be politically expensive for them to abandon the contra cause, according to White House officials and Republican strategists.

"We have made this a high-stakes issue, perhaps too high-stakes," said an official who acknowledges "excesses" in the White House campaign. "But at least we've demonstrated that the president isn't going to walk away from the freedom fighters at a time their existence is on the line."

Phase two of the campaign, as conceived by the White House strategists, proceeds this week with a series of private meetings with members of Congress in which Reagan intends to emphasize his commitment to negotiation and the diplomatic process in Nicaragua. It began Friday when the president, saying that "there can be a diplomatic solution for Central America," named troubleshooter Philip C. Habib as his new special envoy in the region.

"This week was pointing out the tragedy if you don't prevail," said a senior White House official. "Next week is the triumph of freedom if you do." Reagan summed up the week's arguments yesterday, using his regular radio talk to push for the aid package, saying, "Without power, diplomacy will be without leverage . . . History will soon record whether Congress, faced with a powerful Soviet-bloc challenge to capture Nicaragua and spread communism throughout Central America, stood by and watched or had the courage to stand up for freedom and America's security."

Some Republican strategists think that the first confrontational

phase of the strategy, in which White House communications director Patrick J. Buchanan defined the issue as "a choice between the West and the Warsaw Pact," has undermined the attempt to achieve a bipartisan consensus.

"There are two ways to get attention—you can use a 2-by-4 or a 4-by-6," said one strategist. "We used an 8-by-10."

Particularly objectionable to many Democrats and some moderate Republicans was a Buchanan article on the op-ed page of The Washington Post last Wednesday in which he wrote, "With the vote on contra aid, the Democratic Party will reveal whether it stands with Ronald Reagan and the resistance—or [Nicaraguan President] Daniel Ortega and the communists."

But it was Reagan himself who raised the partisan issue, although less starkly, when he met with three leaders of the Nicaraguan resistance in the Oval Office two days before the Buchanan article and appealed for \$100 million in aid for the counterrevolutionaries, or contras, including \$70 million in military assistance. After comparing the contras to the Hungarian freedom fighters crushed by the Soviets in 1956, the president said that congressional refusal to aid them would allow Soviet bases in the hemisphere, threaten the security of the Panama Canal and trigger a migration of hundreds of thousands of refugees to the United States.

"And those who would invite this strategic disaster by abandoning yet another fighting ally of this country in the field will be held fully accountable by history," Reagan said.

This statement was not an off-the-cuff remark by the president. It was described by those knowledgeable about its preparation as part of the White House strategy to "raise the temperature" on an issue that, according to Republican polls, ranks near the bottom of concern among American voters. Among the minority who are concerned, many say they believe that the United States should avoid involvement in "another Vietnam" in Central America.

Both Reagan and Buchanan have privately expressed frustration with this seeming lack of public interest in Nicaragua, according to White House aides. Polls taken for the president continue to show that few Americans have a strong view about the Nicaraguan struggle, and many do not even know which side the administration supports.

While faced with voter indifference and the opposition of the House Democratic leadership on one side of the issue, the White House has been confronted with restiveness in conservative Republican ranks on the other. Such House Republican leaders as Rep. Dick Cheney (Wyo.) and Trent Lott (Miss.) have said, in effect, that the White House should face up to the issue or forget it.

The conservatives were especially dissatisfied with the 1985 compromise engineered by House Republican leader Robert H. Michel (Ill.) and Rep. Dave McCurdy (D-Okla.) to provide \$27 million in nonlethal aid, which expires March 31. At the time, it was widely believed within the administration and on Capitol Hill that military aid would be provided to the contras from private sources and other countries if the United States gave nonlethal assistance.

But as Alfonso Robelo, one of the leaders of the United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO) acknowledged last week in an interview, this was a miscalculation of both the contras and the administration. The contras received only a dribble of military aid from outside, while the numerically superior Sandinista forces received Soviet helicopter gunships, tanks and armored personnel carriers.

In February, intelligence officials gave a grim appraisal of fading contra strength to the president and said that effective military resistance from the contras might disappear unless military aid was quickly provided. This apparently persuaded Michel, who joined with Cheney in a letter asking Reagan to seek substantial military aid and an end to congressional restrictions "prohibiting CIA involvement with the freedom fighters."

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Under these pressures, the president's top advisers decided at a White House strategy session on March 1 to "raise the saliency" of the issue and directly challenge Democratic intentions, according to a participant in the meeting.

"We were badly rushed," said one White House official. "The Republican conservatives wanted military aid, or no aid. The Democrats didn't want any aid at all. The CIA was telling us that the contras might not last through the summer without military help. We needed a full-court press."

It was in this context that the White House launched what one aide called "the strategy of division" that was pursued last week. Its purpose was twofold: to solidify the Republican base by showing Reagan's commitment to the issue and to put pressure on moderate GOP House members in the Northeast and Midwest and raise the stakes for two dozen swing Democratic members in the South and West.

One key White House strategist said that this part of the plan worked, but that Buchanan's statements and writings angered a core of Democrats who had solidly supported contra aid in the past and resented the implied questioning of their patriotism.

"The House is Democratic; by making contra aid a partisan issue we make it much easier for Democrats to go with their leadership," remarked a strategist who said he believes that White House efforts thus far have been counterproductive.

In an administration where many officials are quick to claim credit for successes, such as the change of government in the Philippines, no one has presented himself as author of the White House strategy on contra aid.

While Buchanan received public criticism from opponents of the aid package, others said that the blame for the strategy should be shared by White House chief of staff Donald T. Regan and his chief legislative strategist, Dennis Thomas. They said both of these officials were caught short when House Speaker Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill Jr. (D-Mass.) scheduled the House vote on the issue for March 19, two weeks before the administration wanted it.

"Regan is like a bull in the china shop," said an official who put him at the center of the confrontational strategy. "Either he wins or he breaks all the pieces in the process."

Giving credence to Regan's role, White House officials denied a report in The New York Times that the chief of staff had reprimanded Buchanan for his published criticisms of the Democrats.

While administration officials privately acknowledged tactical deficiencies in their campaign thus far, many expressed the view that the president would eventually emerge a winner through a combination of personal and public appeals, starting Monday with congressional meetings and culminating Sunday in a nationally televised speech.

"Buchanan was the 'bad cop' who pointed out all the perils of not aiding the resistance," said a strategist Friday. "... Now the president can be the 'good cop' who emphasizes his commitment to a peaceful solution and shows how the contras can be a help in achieving that."

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*Staff researcher James Schwartz contributed to this report.*